Shrimpers in Kentucky? Sounds like a fish tale

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By Andrea Hopkins

BUTLER, Kentucky (Reuters) - As a teenager, Dan Moreland raised tobacco and favored cigarettes over seafood -- true to his rural Kentucky roots. Forty years later, Moreland farms prawns instead of tobacco, doesn't smoke, and spends free time trying out new recipes for a twice-weekly shrimp dinner.

"Since I was a little kid, I was involved in tobacco. My grandfather and father both raised it, and I had my own crop in high school," says Moreland fondly, before shrugging. "But once the buyout came, I got tired of fooling with it."

It's a cold April morning in Kentucky tobacco country, and Moreland is heading two hours south to collect 40,000 prawn hatchlings, which he hopes will grow through the summer into a bumper harvest of 1,700 pounds of genuine Kentucky seafood.

Like many small farmers in this state famous for bourbon, thoroughbred horses and a good cigar, Moreland found himself without a tobacco crop in 2004, when Congress eliminated the quota system that had sustained generations of farmers.

The industry-funded $10 billion tobacco buyout turned many of Kentucky's smallest farmers to beekeeping, goat farming, mushroom growing and -- perhaps most surprisingly in this land-locked state -- aquaculture.

Some 125 Kentucky farmers raise fish or prawns, according to Angela Caporelli, aquaculture coordinator at the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. While that's just a fraction of Kentucky's 84,000 farms, the fact that the state even has an aquaculture coordinator surprises many.

"A lot of people had to give up tobacco and were looking for something to replace that income," explained Caporelli. Turns out, the same pure Kentucky water that made great bourbon was just as good for fish.

"The limestone waters are great, and there's a lot of groundwater," said Caporelli. "And while fish farming can be very high-tech, it's also user-friendly. These guys are farmers, they know how to nurture and keep things alive. The basic principles are not all that different, whether it's tobacco or prawns."

ETHNIC MARKETS AND PENGUINS

Moreland, 59, is a Kentucky shrimping pioneer. He started his first pond in 1994 on a few acres of land that drained too poorly to grow good hay, corn or tobacco.

"I read an article about prawn farming. I liked shrimp. It was a novel idea. I thought I'd try it," he says simply.

By the time the buyout ended his tobacco crop 10 years later, Moreland was a shrimping expert and looking to expand. He's added a third pond, built a system of indoor tanks to nurse hatchlings, and now struggles to find enough buyers at harvest time in September.

When Moreland arrives at Shawn Coyle's home-based hatchery near Frankfort, the Kentucky State University aquaculture expert shows off a tank of egg-swollen mother prawns, as well as tank after tank of nearly microscopic orange hatchlings.

Coyle, a native New Yorker, supplies farmers throughout the Midwest with prawn hatchlings and tilapia. He says the hardest part for farmers is finding a market come September.

"In this beans-and-cornbread state we're in, seafood is not traditional, and farmers aren't good marketers," Coyle says.

The relatively high cost of raising the prawns is also a barrier to quick sale. Moreland pays Coyle three cents apiece for his 40,000 hatchlings, each barely larger than a grain of sand. Add the cost of twice-daily feedings and electricity to keep the indoor tanks warm until the prawns are transferred to outdoor ponds in June, and costs quickly mount.

Moreland hopes to sell his shrimp, head on and unpeeled, for $8 a pound during a two-week period in late September. Imported shrimp from Asia, cleaned and ready to eat, is much cheaper and available year-round.

"They can bring it over here peeled, deveined and breaded cheaper than we can grow it," Coyle says.

As a result, Kentucky shrimpers are targeting niche markets: ethnic Asians who like live seafood, high-end consumers willing to pay more for fresh prawns, and zoos and aquariums with hungry penguins to feed and budgets to pay for the best.

For his part, Moreland has gotten used to eating his way through the harvest leftovers, and friends and family stop by year-round to buy a bag of frozen prawns for dinner.

"As far as cooking them, I've tried every different way, some good and some not," Moreland says with a laugh and a reference to his favorite television chef, Emeril Lagasse. "I watch that Emeril sometimes. You've got to have the right spices, or else they can be a bit bland."